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This study of the images of women as portrayed on new television programs in 1984 not only compared them with the images of the last season, but examined the similarities and differences between these characters and real life women. Each continuing female character on every new show was coded for race, age, occupation, marital and socioeconomic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. Analyses of these data showed that, although many of the new fall programs seemed to be close copies of the older programs, there were some surprising departures from the existing norm in that there were increases in the number of minority female characters, the percentage of female entrepreneurs and business owners, and older women characters. Most of the shows continued the trend towards upper middle class and wealthy characters, and even those shows whose characters were portrayed as middle class had environments and lifestyles which suggested wealth. There was also an increase in the number of divorced female characters, but single, never-married female characters still comprised the majority. The year's television families marked a dramatic departure from the traditional nuclear family, with 64% of the families headed up by single parents. Racially, most television families were white. There were also more female characters in new television shows than ever before, with many of these characters playing leading roles or roles equal to those of men. (EW)

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THE PICTURE IMPROVES:

A LOOK AT THE 1984 TELEVISION SEASON

AN ANALYSIS OF FEMALE TV CHARACTERS
ON PROGRAMS PREMIERING IN 1984

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INTRODUCTION

Since 1982 the National Commission on Working Women has published reports on television's image of women. The first report critiqued network programs from 1972-1982. Last year's report analyzed the new fall shows of 1983. This year the Commission has surveyed prime time programs premiering in 1984.

The 1984 report analyzes the image of women on the new fall shows and compares it to the images of last season. In addition, the report looks at the similarities and differences between this season's female TV characters and real life women.

In examining the 1984 programs, we coded the following information for each continuing female character on every new show: race, age, occupation, marital and socio-economic status, and number of children under 18 years of age. This information was obtained from viewing the programs and interviewing network programming and production company staffs.

A major theme emerged in both the Commission's previous reports on the image of women on television. Despite short-lived trends, the prevailing picture of female TV characters was of young, white, single, beautiful women. In contrast with the great diversity of real life women who comprise a variety of ages, occupations, and physical attributes, the televised fantasy of women has been an extremely narrow one. In examining this fall's programming, the Commission wanted to determine if new trends were beginning to emerge or if the 1984 season was following the same patterns as previous years. As the data began to emerge, we discovered that, although many of the new fall shows seem to be close copies of older programs, there are some surprising departures from the existing norm. In significant ways, the 1984 fall television season is quite different from preceding ones.

REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

RACE: In 1984 there are more minority female TV characters than there were last season (12 in 1984, three in 1983). This year there are 10 black female characters on new shows, as opposed to one last year (Hotel). There is one Asian female character (E/R) and one Hispanic female on new programs (Miami Vice). Out of 67 female TV characters on the new fall shows, 82% are white and 18% minority. Last year 93% were white, 7% minority.

OCCUPATION: Seventy-six percent of all adult female TV characters in new programs have jobs outside the home. Most are concentrated in professional occupations such as lawyer or doctor, and there is a dramatic increase this year in female entrepreneurs and business owners (11%).

In real life, working women are concentrated in clerical and service jobs (51%). However, on this season's new shows, only 12% of female characters work in those occupations.

The number of homemakers continues to decline on television, from a peak of almost half of all female characters in the early 70s to 6% in 1984.

AGE: In 1984 female TV characters are still younger than women in real life. On this season's new shows, 66% of all female characters are between 20 and 40 years old, although in reality women under 40 constitute only half of the female population. However, older women are starting to appear in slightly growing numbers. Ten percent of all female characters this season are 40-59, and many of them work outside the home as nurses, writers, court clerks, administrative assistants, and self-employed executives. In addition, the lead character of Murder, She Wrote is an older woman who is independent, clever, and successful.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: This season's new shows continue the trend toward upper middle class and wealthy characters. Of all the season's new programs, only two contain working class or poor female characters (Punky Brewster, Dreams). Even shows whose characters are portrayed as middle class have environments and lifestyles which suggest wealth. For example, the Cosby's and their children live in a large brownstone house in Manhattan, a single mother on Who's the Boss? has live-in, domestic help, and the blue collar workers on Dreams have expensive clothes and musical equipment.

MARITAL STATUS: There is an increase of divorced female TV characters in 1984; they account for 10% of all women on television. All but one work outside the home. There is also an increase of female characters who are widowed on new shows (9%). However, single, never-married female TV characters still comprise the majority of all women on television; they are 55% of the total this year. Married female TV characters account for only 16% of all women on television; 73% of them have jobs outside the home.

CHILDREN AND FAMILY: There still are few women with children on TV, although the number is up slightly from last year. There is also a small increase in working mothers from 1983.

This year's TV families mark a dramatic departure from TV's traditional nuclear families of the past. Sixty-four percent of all families on this season's new shows are headed by single parents; only 36% are two-parent families. In spite of their single parent status, however, these TV families don't seem to suffer any economic hardship. One hundred percent of all families headed by single women are middle or upper class; no TV families are poor or working class.

Racially, most TV families are white. The Cosby Show portrays a black family, but there are no Hispanic or Asian families on this season's new shows.

MALE/FEMALE RATIO: There are more female characters in new shows this year than ever before. Out of 143 new TV characters, 67 (47%) are female. In fact, on NBC there are more female than male characters on this season's new shows (51%). Ten years ago, women on television were outnumbered by men three to one. Today, that has changed.

In another first, many of these female characters are playing either leading roles or those equal to men, as opposed to supportive and subservient parts in the past. Of the 27 new prime time series this fall, 10 feature women in strong roles.

PROGRAM GENRE: In an attempt to reproduce the ratings successes of previous seasons' detective shows, the networks are airing more of this genre in 1984. Almost 40% of the new offerings are spy-cop/detective shows, and all but one have women in important roles.

About a third of the new shows are situation comedies; two of them feature men taking care of children (Charles in Charge, Who's the Boss?). The latter program features a man who cooks, cleans, and cares for children; his boss is a woman who is president of an advertising agency and the mother of an eight-year-old son.

REPORT FINDINGS

What's New This Season

In significant ways, the 1984 TV season deviates from past television years. Specifically, there are more female characters, more minorities, new family structures, job diversity, new roles for men, and a focus on issues of concern to women.

MORE FEMALE CHARACTERS

There are more female characters on the TV screen this year, and they are more diverse than in years past. Ten years ago, the ratio of male to female characters was three to one. Year in and year out, new programs premiered which featured no female continuing characters at all. In 1973, 28% of the top 25 prime time shows had no regularly appearing actresses.

That invisibility of women on the screen has been changing. Last year only three new shows lacked female characters. This year there were two new shows without women (Highway to Heaven, Riptide).

In addition to the increasing number of female characters on television this year, they are more diverse than in years past, and more of them have strong roles. In shows like Jessie, Murder, She Wrote, V, and Kate and Allie, females are the stars. Their characters show leadership, authority, and courage. In the program V, the major female character, Diana, is a villain who is the leader of evil forces. Her enemy is Julie, a doctor, the leader of the resistance. Although in the past women have starred in situation comedies (Maude, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Laverne and Shirley), it has been rare to see female leads in noncomedic programs.

MORE MINORITIES

Another significant change for women in 1984 is the increasing number of minority female TV characters. This year there are 12, ten of whom are black. The percentage of minority female characters this year is 18%, up from 7% in 1983.

One new program in particular accounts for 40% of all black female characters. The Cosby Show, a situation comedy, features a black middle class family with four children. The father is a doctor, the mother a lawyer. In addition to providing an abundance of minority characters, this program answers critics' past concerns regarding the absence of intact black families on television and the lack of black role models. The Cosby Show features professional, accomplished parents who confront the normal joys and problems of family life.

However, 67% of all this season's minority female characters are confined to situation comedies (The Cosby Show, Punky Brewster, E/R) rather than being spread across various program types. Two minority female characters are on dramatic programs (Jessie, Paper Dolls), and two are in a cop/detective program (Miami Vice), all in minor, support roles. Of 27 new programs this fall, six contain minority female characters; the remaining 21 shows are all white.

NEW FAMILY STRUCTURES

Television's families are also changing. In the past the traditional two-parent family was the norm. This year, those families are in the minority (36%) as TV portrays a wide variety of single-headed households. Out of 14 television families this season, two are headed by single men, three are headed by divorced women, one is headed by a widow, and two are headed by non-parent adults. Interestingly, half of the widows on TV this season are under 40 years old.

DIFFERENT JOBS

In past years when female TV characters had jobs outside the home, one rarely saw them working. Too often, their occupations were merely hooks for romance and viewers didn't get to see female characters actually doing their jobs. This year that invisibility is starting to change, as the workplace increasingly becomes the focus of attention and action on new programs. Although many of the female characters have highly unusual jobs (police detective, government spy, photographer-detective, helicopter pilot, musician-detective, mystery writer, successful model), viewers do see them at their jobs with their colleagues and bosses, in situations not laden with romance and seduction.

NEW ROLES FOR MEN

This season also introduces a new role for men, that of nurturer. In classic role reversal, two new situation comedies show men staying at home with the children while the mothers go to work. In Charles in Charge, the male is a college student earning room and board by caring for three children, while in Who's the Boss?, the male housekeeper is a single father from Brooklyn working for a well-to-do family in suburban Connecticut. Although the humor plays upon the reversed roles, the two male leads are likeable characters, not objects of ridicule.

In the prime time soap opera, Paper Dolls, Michael Caswell is portrayed as a nurturing father who wants to spend time with his family. Unlike other male characters on the show, he is not fiercely ambitious about work, but rather concerned about the adverse effects of fame and money.

Perhaps the most appealing father on a new show this season is Bill Cosby on The Cosby Show. Playing the role of Dr. Cliff Huxtable, Cosby is an extremely nurturing parent. He reads stories to his youngest child, he shoots baskets

with his son, he has long talks with his middle daughter, and he worries over his eldest daughter's independence. In short, he is emotionally linked to his children and is as available and involved in their lives as a mother would be.

WOMEN'S ISSUES

Issues of interest to women are beginning to emerge on new programs as well. Perhaps because there is a small but increasing number of women writers behind the scenes, some female TV characters sound less like stereotypes and more like real women; and some shows' plots revolve around the actual concerns of women (divorced homemakers going back to college, working parents trying to find time together, single mothers raising kids alone). Many of these plots have the ring of authenticity to them and are not parodies of real life situations. In the past, much of the world of television was the world of men. When programs did portray the world of women, they were too often idealized versions of domestic life or glamorized stereotypes of "career girls."

SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE

In spite of some significant changes on this season's new programs, many of the characters and plots are strongly reminiscent of the past. In some ways, the changes this season are deviations and exceptions to the rule; they are not the norm.

STEREOTYPES

The norm for female characters this season, as last, is to be young, white and single, although there are some interesting exceptions to that rule in terms of race and age. The "female-as-victim," a major ingredient in action/adventure shows in the past, is still thriving, especially on Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer where beautiful women get killed each week and the only continuing female character is the curvaceous secretary, Velda, who comes to work in extremely tight, low-cut dresses.

The "girl detective" show which puts its stars in skimpy clothes and dangerous situations and which relies on skills of seduction rather sleuthing (Charlie's Angels, Policewoman) is alive and well on Partners in Crime, where Lonnie Anderson and Lynda Carter wear inappropriate outfits and where fashion and sex appeal overwhelm plot and character.

LIMITED MINORITY ROLES

In addition, most shows are still all-white. Seventy-eight percent of this season's new programs have no minority female characters. Minority women seem confined to situation comedies and support roles; except for Diahann Carroll in the long-running soap opera, Dynasty, they have yet to break into major dramatic roles.

This season the number of black female TV characters has expanded from one to 10, but for other minorities, there has been little or no progress.

The character of Wendy Armstrong, an Asian doctor on St. Elsewhere, has been the only dramatic Asian role on television. At the end of last season the show's writers eliminated the Wendy Armstrong character by having her commit suicide. Their reasons for her demise were that they had been unable to develop her character and could not make her seem interesting. As a result, the only current Asian female TV characters on any programs are Klinger's wife on After/MASH and the emergency room receptionist on E/R, both situation comedies. There is only one Hispanic female character on a new show this season, in a role that so far is extremely minor (Miami Vice).

WEALTH

Perhaps most significant of all is television's continuing fascination with wealth. To be rich is "in," to aspire to be rich commendable. Characters on new programs range only from the fantastically wealthy who wear million-dollar jewelry and own vast empires, to the comfortable upper middle class, who are this season's norm.

On television there are no money problems, even for single mothers; in fact, poor people simply don't exist. There is no poverty, no economic struggle, no unemployment. Some critics have said that this fixation with wealth is merely evidence of TV absorping the real values of today's society. Others have said it reflects the narrow perspective of television which excludes more important human values.

TELEVISION FANTASY VS. THE REAL WORLD

In its quest for escapist fantasy, television can be alternately exasperating and amusing. At times the stark contrast between the real world and fantasy can come as welcome relief; at other times, the fantasy can be restrictive and even harmful.

When working women watch television in the evening after a long day at their jobs, they might watch a program featuring female TV characters portraying working women. On one particular show this fall they would have seen a working woman TV character lying in her office in the middle of the day, dressed in a small towel, while meeting with a businessman wearing a suit. At other times this same character conducts business in her hot tub (which she uses during business hours); she also sleeps with her clients during the work day (Paper Dolls).

If these working women watch Punky Brewster, they would see a seven-year-old girl who is independent and mature, eagerly dispensing advice and wisdom to her guardian, a cranky old widower. Although Punky is only seven, her experience belies her years. She cooks entire dinners and cleans the house. She doesn't need child care or discipline; in fact, she is as self-sufficient as an adult. Interestingly, the Punky Brewster phenomenon continues a trend started by Diff'rent Strokes, Webster, and Silver Spoons, in which youngsters give guidance to bewildered adults. In a peculiar role reversal, the children have become the adults, acting as companions and confidants.

It is ironic that in the real world a major problem of working mothers is child care, while TV's fantasy children are totally self-sufficient and need no adult supervision. One gets the impression these TV children could be left alone without any parental guilt or anxiety.

CONCLUSION

In spite of these restrictive fantasies and somewhat limited progress, there has been real growth this season. Last year the Commission complained that TV portrayed too few minority women, not enough older women, and hardly any working mothers. This season is a step in the right direction; all three types have become more visible on the screen. In addition, women's roles on TV have become more diverse and their characters expanded.

This trend needs to continue. As the television networks search for successful formulas to appeal to their female viewers, they should build upon the changes begun this season. They need to develop a diversity of female television characters to appeal to the diverse viewing audience across the country. Rather than copying the narrow formulas of past TV shows, network programmers should develop characters and plots which reflect the richness and variety of viewers' lives. Such programs can entertain and capture large audiences.

The Commission hopes that this season is the beginning of a long-term trend to broaden women's roles on television. We hope that the number of minority female characters continues to increase, that older women continue to appear in an increasing variety of roles, that women working in diverse jobs are seen, that women from more than one economic class have visibility, and that working mothers, both married and single, continue to make their appearance on new programs. Furthermore, we hope that more female TV characters have leading roles on programs ranging from situation comedy to action/adventure and drama.

Those changes would give viewers even more to respond to and would begin to close the gap between fantasy females on TV and real women in today's world. Such increased diversity on the screen has long been a goal of the National Commission on Working Women, and we are heartened to see steps in that direction on this season's new shows.